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English Garden

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RADIO FREE EUROPE/Radio Liberty, the United States' propaganda stations, were in the news last week because a missing editorial director of Radio Liberty

By Richard Reeves

appeared in Moscow to denounce the stations at a rowdy press conference. It was not clear whether Oleg Tumanov jumped or was pushed back to his native land (he had defected to the West in 1965), but it was perfectly clear that the Soviets take "The Radios" more seriously than most Americans do.

An even better indication of Soviet attitudes might be the popularity last year of a movie called "Can-Can in an English Garden," a thriller about a daring KGB man who infiltrates Radio Liberty. "It shows in a new light," wrote one Moscow critic, "the kitchen in which the stinking dish of false reports is prepared."

"Am Englischen Garten" here is the address of Radio Liberty, which broadcasts in nine languages into the Soviet Union, and of Radio Free Europe, which broadcasts in 12 languages into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Baltic republics.

The Radios, with an estimated 14 million regular listeners in the Soviet Union and 38 million in Eastern Europe, are not a world broadcasting service like the Voice of America or the British Broadcasting Corporation. They are surrogate home-news services broadcasting national and local news, cultural programming and even sports into societies with controlled press, radio and television. The Radios are often the place on the short-wave dial where Russians and Eastern Europeans find such news as Soviet nuclear disasters and the doings of Lech Walesa and Solidarity. "If you would close down Radio Free Europe," Polish government spokesman Jerzy Urban said last summer, "the underground here would be finished."

To learn what The Radios actually said — and what they did with

the \$132 million annual budget, up over 50 percent in the Reagan years — I visited the stations for a week last November and read translated texts of broadcasts.

The RFE/RL newsrooms and studios reminded me of a railroad station in the Balkans. A dozen languages clashed in the hallways, not only from broadcasts and conversations, but from monitored radio and television broadcasts from "the other side."

It is a place more European than American and so is the on-air product: intense, intellectual, ideological, complex and dense. On the Uzbek language service of Radio Liberty, several programs touched on changes in leadership of the Writers Union in the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan. On the Byelorussian service, the discussions concerned local reports about a milkmaid named Sabena Zhuk, who was unfairly denied a collective-farm prize.

A lot of the programming sounds like that, which makes it difficult for Americans to control — even if they are Central Intelligence Agency operatives as Mr. Tumanov claimed last week. The CIA, in fact, established the stations originally but relinquished control to a presidentially appointed Board of International Broadcasting when that fact became known in 1971.

But humor as propaganda this American could understand. There is a great deal of it; this sample comes from a dramatized conversation about new Bulgarian youth laws mandating school uniforms to discourage "Western tendencies in dress":

"You mean every teen-ager will have to wear a uniform?"

"No. That won't happen because no uniforms will be available."

"But hasn't there been a decision?"

"There are lots of decisions in Bulgaria, but there are no uniforms."

The Radios have had their ups and downs during the Reagan years. Some congressional investigators have criticized anti-Semitism in broadcasts by Russian emigres. Others have been concerned about zealous conservative executives motivated by a belief that the Soviet Union could be on the verge of collapse.

The worst days, though, seem past. The current president of RFE/RL is Gene Pell, very conservative but also a respected professional broadcaster who worked for years for NBC News. What seems to have happened is that no matter how zealously anti-communist the Reagan appointees are at The Radios, they have come to understand that credibility is their most important product. The bottom line, whether or not the CIA is still tending flowers in the English Garden, is that the Soviets would not be so angry and so determined to jam The Radios if people in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe did not believe and trust American propaganda.